

The Arab Bedouin of the Naqab

Myths and Misconceptions

Introduction

The Arab Bedouin citizens of Israel are members of the indigenous Palestinian Arab minority, a community who remained on their lands (in the Naqab (Negev)) after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. **The 200,000 Arab Bedouin make up over 30% of the population in the Naqab, and have lived on their ancestral lands for generations practicing a traditional agricultural lifestyle.** The term “Bedouin” derives from the Arabic word for desert (“badiya”), and refers to their unique way of life. Considered a demographic and geo-political threat by the State of Israel, the Arab Bedouin, many of whom are living in villages that pre-existed the establishment of the State, are referred to by the Israeli government as “squatters” and “illegal trespassers”, who are stealing State land.

Nearly half of the Arab Bedouin community lives in 45 so called “unrecognized villages”, which do not appear on any official state maps. These villages are deliberately not connected to state infrastructure such as the water and electricity networks, roads, health care clinics and schools. **By withholding services, the State is attempting to force the Bedouin to abandon their ancestral land and move to government-planned towns, the most impoverished in Israel.** This policy of displacement, dispossession, concentration and forced urbanization violates the rights of the indigenous Bedouin community and completely disregards their historic ties to the land of the Naqab. **The Israeli government’s policy is grounded in widespread myths, misconceptions and stereotypes. So what’s the real story?**

Adalah calls on the Israeli government to:

Withdraw the Praver Plan Law

Recognize the “unrecognized villages” and the land claims of the indigenous Arab Bedouin community

Halt home demolitions and forced evictions from the unrecognized villages

Engage in meaningful dialogue with the Arab Bedouin community and the Arab political leadership to resolve the land claims.

Provide equal health, education, and employment opportunities for Arab Bedouin citizens of Israel



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Myth 1: The Arab Bedouin are not an indigenous people

Historians agree that the Arab Bedouin have inhabited the Naqab since the 7th century, and were the only inhabitants of the desert until the mid-20th century. In 2011, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, James Anaya, determined that the Arab Bedouin, a community with a longstanding presence throughout a geographic region with a connection to lands and the maintenance of cultural traditions that are distinct from those of majority populations, are entitled to international protection as an indigenous people.

Myth 2: The Arab Bedouin are nomads

The Arab Bedouin have organized in settlements in the Naqab since the 16th century; these settlements were largely fixed and stabilized by the 19th century. While their pastoral way of life necessitated seasonal movement, their travel centered around historic villages with privately owned plots of land and collectively held pasture lands. These ancestral settlements and historic villages are now “unrecognized” by the State of Israel.

Myth 3: The Arab Bedouin are claiming all of the land in the Naqab

In 1969, Israel established a process whereby citizens (**the Arab Bedouin were granted Israeli citizenship by 1954**) could register claims of land ownership with the state. From 1970 to 1979, the Arab Bedouin submitted 3,221 ownership claims over their ancestral land, for a total of 971,000 dunums (242,750 acres). Today, after various settlements with the State, **the Arab Bedouin, who make up 30% of the Naqab population, are justly claiming 600,000 dunums (200,000 acres), or less than 5% of the total area of the Naqab.**

Misconception 4: The Arab Bedouin culture is highly criminalized

The seven government-planned Arab Bedouin townships, the poorest in Israel, do have some of the highest crime rates in the country. However, such crime rates must be understood within the context of the concentration of poverty, forced urbanization and limited state investment. Here are some important figures:

- **67.2% of Arab Bedouin families live in poverty** v. 20.5% of all families in Israel
- **The school drop-out rate for Arab Bedouin children in unrecognized villages is 70%.**
- State expenditure per capita on social welfare is 30% lower for Arab localities than for Jewish localities.

Myth 5: The Arab Bedouin live in scattered, unknown settlements; connecting the settlements to infrastructure is impossible and unprecedented

Nearly half of the Arab Bedouin community in the Naqab lives in **45 permanent and known villages, at least 10 of which are in the “process of recognition” by the State.** These 45 villages either pre-date the establishment of the State of Israel, or were established in the 1950s by order of the military government that concentrated the Arab Bedouin into the restricted “Siyag” area in the northern Naqab. Ironically, in 2010, the Knesset retroactively legalized around 60 individual settlements in the Naqab that were established without permits and contrary to planning laws. These individual settlements, all but one of which are Jewish owned, are connected to all the basic services and are often located near the “unrecognized” Bedouin villages.

Misconception 6: The Arab Bedouin are offered “free” land in government-planned towns, but many choose to live without water and electricity

The first government-planned town of Tel Sheva was established in 1969, and six additional townships were created over the next three decades. The **internally displaced Bedouin** (those who were forced to leave their ancestral land and move to the Siyag region) **make up 85% of the population in the impoverished government-planned towns.** The vast majority of the Bedouin who were not

displaced from their ancestral land have remained in their historic villages, despite the fact that the State of Israel deliberately denies them access to basic services. The government’s policy of withholding services is an attempt to encourage the Arab Bedouin to move to the “free” land in recognized towns. “Free” is a misnomer. First, the land is claimed by other Bedouin, and second, in order to receive the “free” land in the townships, the Bedouin must give up all ancestral land claims.

Myth 7: Arab Bedouin culture is best suited for urban life

The Arab Bedouin have successfully cultivated the land in the Naqab for centuries; they were history’s first desert farmers. While some Arab Bedouin may indeed want to raise their families in cities, full and equal citizenship means having the choice to determine your own life. The Arab Bedouin should be able to choose where and how they live. Further, it is clear that rural life is not incompatible with modernity. Kibbutzim, moshavim and individual family farms in the Naqab are all connected to all basic services and their Israeli Jewish residents enjoy the comforts of modern life. In unrecognized villages, the Arab Bedouin must be innovative and incur huge expense in order to obtain the same basic services and comforts guaranteed to their Jewish neighbors who choose a rural life. As such, many Arab Bedouin families have invested in solar energy panels to power their computers and wireless internet, washing machines, air conditioners and heaters.

Myth 8: The Arab Bedouin have never offered their own solution for their community

Throughout history, all governing authorities in the Naqab, excluding the Israeli government, recognized the Arab Bedouin traditional land ownership system as the appropriate framework for Bedouin settlement. Also, in 2011, the Regional Council for the Unrecognized Villages, Bimkom and Sidreh released an “Alternative Plan” for the unrecognized villages, proposing to recognize villages and traditional land ownership. The plan offers a model of sustainable development of the Naqab, based on principles of equality and respect of human rights.

Misconception 9: The Praver Plan is the best answer to the Arab Bedouin “problem”

Under the pending Law for the Regulation of Bedouin Settlement in the Negev (“Praver Plan Law”) - 2012, all of the unrecognized villages are under threat of being destroyed and up to **70,000 Arab Bedouin will be forcibly displaced** from their villages. Adalah joins the Arab Bedouin community in rejecting the Praver Plan Law and any imposed government decision that does not recognize their rights to their ancestral land.

Myth 10: The international community accepts these myths and misconceptions

OECD 2010: [Israel must] **Urgently take practical steps to connect Bedouin settlements with electricity, sewerage and transport systems.** Continue with efforts to improve their educational opportunities and outcomes, including vocational training.

UN Human Rights Committee 2010 (CCPR/C/ISR/CO/3): The State party should **respect the Bedouin population’s right to their ancestral land and their traditional livelihood** based on agriculture.

UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 2011 (E/C.12/ISR/CO/3): The State party [should] officially regulate the unrecognized villages, **cease the demolition of buildings in those villages,** and ensure the enjoyment of the right to adequate housing.

Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 2012 (CERD.C.ISR.CO.14-16): Withdraw the 2012 discriminatory proposed Law for the Regulation of the Bedouin Settlement in the Negev (“Praver Plan Law”), which would legalize the ongoing policy of home demolitions and forced displacement of the **indigenous Bedouin communities.**